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HOBART EAST TIMOR COMMITTEE
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UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON DECOLONIZATION

PETITION REGARDING EAST TIMOR

NEW YORK, AUGUST 7, 1991

Doug McGregor

Your Excellency, Respected Members of this Committee,

We thank you for permission to present a petition to these hearings on East Timor. The opportunity to have some input to the decolonization process, as it affects the people of East Timor, is deeply appreciated. We are also pleased to make known the feelings of many of the people in Tasmania who are deeply sympathetic towards the East Timorese people and who, through our presence at these hearings, have also gained a better understanding of the work of this Committee.

We would also like to express our appreciation of the United Nations' decision to focus on decolonization during this decade. The relationship of colonizer to colonized is an unequal one, with the implicit or explicit assumption that some people are incapable or unfit for self-government. But as the great naturalist, Russell Wallace, pointed out a century and a half ago, "the fitness for self-government is inherent in human nature."

The past year has seen much advancement of the case for decolonization of East Timor, including the growing support of parliamentarians particularly in Japan and the USA, a variety of actions and statements emanating from Europe, continuing firm support from many members of the non-aligned movement, and Portugal's decision to challenge in the international Court of Justice the probably illegal Timor Gap Treaty signed by Australia and Indonesia.

These various actions provide moral support for the East Timorese people but they remain to be converted into supportive actions within East Timor itself, where people continue to live with the reality of arbitrary arrest, detention without trial, rape, forced relocation, disappearances, the omnipresence of the Indonesian military, the demand under threat of confinement and torture that they exclusively use the Indonesian language. Indeed the Indonesian military has devised many other methods by which to provoke fear and humiliation.

We would like to refer to three aspects of the situation which are of particular interest to the wider community at present and which have been brought to our attention.

Firstly, the campaign currently being organized by the Australian Council for Overseas Aid to promote Australian support for talks on East Timor is receiving growing endorsement at both individual and community levels. We hope that it will be able to bring sufficient pressure to bear upon the Australian government for it to change its current position, which does not reflect the concern and sympathy of the Australian people.

In 1990 the leader of the East Timor resistance, Commander Xanana Gusmao, said "I am ready to discuss any project for a solution without preconditions, under the auspices of the United Nations." In 1989 the Bishop of East Timor, Monsignor Carlos Belo, wrote to the Secretary General seeking support for a United Nations sponsored referendum. These two men are admired and esteemed throughout East Timor and what they are saying can be seen as representative of the wishes of the East Timorese people as a whole.

Such a program is also in the best interests of the Indonesian people. We believe, too, that all United Nations' members, in accordance with the UN Charter, have a responsibility to see that fellow members - in this instance, Indonesia - enter into talks rather than to persist with its illegal war on the East Timorese.

Secondly, a number of recent events have served as reminders that questions of justice do not disappear. They may be hidden or suppressed but they still exist. We refer to the example of talks begun only last year aimed at the provision of German reparations to Poland in compensation for the massive damage inflicted on the Polish people fifty years ago. There are other examples which indicate the strong possibility that the young people of Indonesia will eventually find themselves paying reparations for the damage inflicted on thousands of East Timorese families by the Indonesian government and military.

In this context it is also important to mention the failure of both the Australian and Japanese governments to pay official reparation to East Timor for the damage inflicted during World War Two. Those governments which uncritically support Indonesia's occupation of East Timor - in particular Australia, the USA, Japan, the ASEAN nations and several Islamic nations - are, if nothing else, being extremely short-sighted.

And, thirdly, we would like to draw your attention to the degree of frustration which exists on this issue, not only among ordinary Australians but among ordinary people everywhere. Repeatedly people say things like "the United Nations acted promptly and decisively on Kuwait and the plight of the Kurdish people - why has it achieved nothing for East Timor in 15 years?" A recent seminar held in Tasmania and entitled 'People Power and the United Nations' is representative of the widespread belief that the United Nations is being held back by several member states prepared only to act in areas of self-interest rather than on the more fundamental basis of respect for human rights and aspirations.

In the context of East Timor, we would like to make the following proposals arising from this concern:

Firstly, that the United Nations and this Committee actively promote talks between Timorese, Portuguese, and Indonesian representatives which seek a just and humane solution to the occupation of East Timor;

Secondly, that the work of the United Nations and this Committee in particular be made as widely and publicly available as possible within East Timor itself, so that the people of East Timor have the constant reassurance that their needs and rights have not been forgotten or overlooked in this period during which the United Nations is working for the implementation of a solution;

Thirdly, in view of the continuing abuse of Indonesian military regime in East Timor, we respectfully request this Committee to consider supporting calls for an international ban on arms sales to Indonesia; and

Fourthly, in view of the problems in implementing resolutions on East Timor (both from the General Assembly and the Security Council), it would be helpful if this Committee could identify areas of difficulty and barriers to its successful efforts. People frequently ask why good resolutions fail to be translated into good actions. This Committee might be able to make recommendations to facilitate the process of implementing UN resolutions, particularly those referring to the process of decolonization;

The recent call by the British Prime Minister that the United Nations, not the United States, act as the world's police is also pertinent to East Timor. Such a policing process might well have been able to prevent the Indonesian invasion taking place, and could help bring about an Indonesian withdrawal now.

We would like to end with some words from a statement presented to the United Nations some years ago by the Celtic League of Nations:

"No small nation can hope to survive either as a cultural or social organism in the modern world unless it is given the means to defend and enrich and strengthen its own life. And amongst those means none is more essential than a government of its own."

These words could also sum up the needs and aspirations of the East Timorese people. We commend the suffering people of East Timor to your care, your diligence and the integrity of your belief in justice and peace.

Your Excellency, Committee Members; I was in East Timor just over a year ago. I saw the conditions under which the people live: poverty, under-nourishment, intimidation, their land and themselves being exploited thoroughly by their new colonizers to an extent unimaginable prior to 1975. I feel qualified as a graduate student of international development to have established that the technical progress and services claimed to have been achieved by colonial Indonesia do not reach the Timorese people and do not, therefore, give them a better standard of living. The Timorese would be much better off in control of their own development. This, of course, has been clearly asserted by the well-publicized report by Gadja Mada University from April 1990.

On behalf of the Hobart East Timor Committee, please accept my thanks and encouragement in finding the means to implement the UN's resolutions. They would be effective in bringing a just solution to this most principled struggle; but what are the barriers? Why do they remain? Who do they benefit?

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